

# Distanced Data: Transcribing Other People's Research Tapes

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In this article, we report on our qualitative study involving eight individuals hired to transcribe research tapes in university contexts. We consider issues of data analysis and data trustworthiness and the implications for both when transcription is assigned to someone other than the researcher. We explore the challenges transcribers faced completing their work, transcription decisions they made in situ, and the effects of the transcribers' degree of investment in the research on the transcripts produced. We highlight the need for researchers to acknowledge transcription as an important aspect of the research process and take seriously the decision of who transcribes.

Keywords: transcription, qualitative methodology, data trustworthiness, interviewing, research assistants

Cet article offre un compte-rendu d'une étude qualitative concernant huit individus embauchés pour transcrire des cassettes de recherche dans un contexte universitaire. Nous étudions la problématique de l'analyse des données, de la fiabilité des données et du rôle qu'elles jouent dans la transcription accomplie par quelqu'un d'autre que le chercheur. Nous explorons les défis auxquels les préposés à la machine à transcrire font face dans la réalisation de leur travail, dans leurs décisions in situ et les effets sur la transcription finale de leur niveau d'investissement dans la recherche. Nous soulignons le besoin que les chercheurs reconnaissent la transcription comme un aspect important du processus de recherche et de prendre au sérieux le choix de ceux qui font la transcription.

Mots-clés: transcription, méthodologie qualitative, fiabilité des données, entrevues, assistants de recherche

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The use of qualitative methodology in educational contexts has grown tremendously in the last few decades. In education faculties both professors and students are turning to qualitative methodologies to interrogate questions of practice, and other areas of educational import (Page, 2001). In particular, educational researchers use various forms

of interviewing as a primary method of data collection, and transcripts as a means of re/presenting that data in text. However, transcription issues are seldom addressed in reports of qualitative research or in discussions of qualitative methodologies. Given that transcripts, although twice removed from the original conversations recorded, are texts central to analysis, it is surprising that little attention has been paid to the transcription process (Lapadat, 2000). For the most part, transcription continues to be considered a mechanical chore (Agar, 1996; Lapadat & Lindsay, 1999). The lack of attention paid to the process is related, at least partially, to perceptions that transcription is merely a matter of transferring what was captured on tape to text, a perception entrenched in the field. Connected to this notion of transference is the assumption that a one-to-one correspondence occurs between the tape and text, that transcribers have captured the reality of the recorded conversation in the transcript (Green, Franquiz, & Dixon, 1997; Mishler, 1991). Such positivist assumptions support the acceptance of transcripts as authoritative texts that hold certain truths, and maintain that the accuracy of transcripts is dictated by the ability of the person transcribing to sustain an objective stance.

Methods of turning talk into text have been addressed in the literature in multiple ways that cross disciplinary boundaries (Lapadat & Lindsay, 1999; Ochs, 1979; ten Have, 1997). In our research on transcription, we critique the naïve realism that leaves unquestioned the possibility of an objective transcriber, and ignores the complexities of transcription, which resemble more the work of translation than that of transference (Kvale, 1996; Lapadat & Lindsay, 1999; Poland, 1995; Tilley, 2003a). We argue with Lapadat and Lindsay and others that transcription is an interpretive act from which arises "analytic and theoretical issues that are inherent in any form of representation" (Mishler, 1991, p. 277).

Although scholars have paid some attention to the complexities of this interpretive process, they have made scant mention of the fact that researchers and/or interviewers are frequently not the ones completing the transcription task; therefore, other people, often hired for the task, influence what appears in text and what researchers use for analysis.

In this article, we report on a study that examines the experiences of individuals hired to transcribe research tapes in university contexts.<sup>1</sup> Participants recruited were graduate students hired as research assistants (RAs) or individuals no longer students but hired to complete transcription work on an individual contract basis. Questions central

to this study included: What is the relation between the transcription process and trustworthiness of data? What are the implications for researcher's analysis when the work of transcription involves another person? And to what degree does the transcriber's level of involvement in the research affect the transcripts produced?

Throughout this article we include extensive quotes from our participant-transcribers to provide more than our words as re/presentations of what was said. In addition to assigning pseudonyms to transcribers, we have changed identifying information to maintain anonymity and confidentiality. We edited transcript excerpts for purposes of clarity, taking care, in as much as possible, not to affect our participants' intended meanings. For example, we chose to delete extensive repetition of words such as "um" and "ah" and repetitive phrases, and to edit for tense agreement for ease of reading. We acknowledge the limitations of clipping, snipping, and juxtaposing quotes to re/present our participants' retelling of their experiences; however, we believe the picture constructed has much to tell.

#### THE RESEARCH PROJECT

##### Participants

All eight participant-transcribers in this study were hired for transcription work completed at Canadian universities. The transcribers were involved in a range of research projects, from small studies with one principal researcher to large, externally funded projects conducted by a research team. The extent of their involvement in the research projects varied. Some transcribers transcribed research tapes only; others were intricately tied to many aspects of the research conducted and felt invested in the project. Variations existed on both these situations.

##### Data

Interviews served as the primary data for our research. Each participant-transcriber took part in two in-depth, open-ended interviews that we audio taped (Fontana & Frey, 2000; Hollway & Jefferson, 1997; Merriam, 1998). Our interview questions, focused on the transcribers' experiences of transcription work, reflected our interests in uncovering the ways in which individuals transcribing

tapes influenced the transcripts constructed. We also wrote fieldnotes (Sanjek, 1990) after each interview to contextualize the interview experience and to record information often not captured on the tape. As well, we kept methodology journals to document and critique our process, note our frustrations, store analytic thoughts, and write recommendations.

#### Our Transcription Practices

When designing our study, we were cognizant that our research questions addressed issues that we needed to consider in our own research practice. We did not isolate the emphasis on transcription and its ties to trustworthiness of data as a topic of research for the project; instead, this emphasis was intricately woven into our research design. We were conducting educational research, using interviewing as the primary source of data and constructing interview transcripts that served to re/present in-depth, open-ended conversations. We were engaging in research practices that we were also researching with our participant-transcribers. We applied the data we collected and analyzed in our project to our own research practice as a way to critique and incorporate change into the emergent design.

At the design stage of this study we decided that we would transcribe all interview tapes ourselves. In our transcription work, we aimed for consistency while acknowledging the interpretive, analytical process that transcription involves and the challenges inherent in attempting to produce accurate re/presentation of taped conversation (Lapadat, 2000; Lapadat & Lindsay, 1999; Tilley, 2003a, 2003b). First, we constructed a set of transcription conventions that we both agreed to follow (Appendix A). We both transcribed the same two interview tapes to test the appropriateness of our conventions, and made slight alterations. We decided overall the conventions worked well as a result of the lengthy discussions we had, about the detail and structure necessary for our transcripts, prior to transcribing.

Because researchers need to construct transcription systems to serve the needs of specific research projects, we connected our transcription decisions to the purpose of our research and our plans for analysis. For example, our conventions produced transcripts appropriate for research focused on understanding participants' experiences of transcription work through the re-telling of their involvement in the process. Our aim was to re/present these experiences so the conventions we used were general in nature, not calling for minute details such as exact

counts of all pauses and hesitations in the recorded conversations. The transcripts constructed were suited to analysis procedures established to uncover codes, categories, and themes connected to understanding participant experience. These same conventions would be inadequate in research projects emphasizing language structures embedded in interview conversations (conversational analysis or discourse analysis), which call for a depth of precision not necessary for our purpose (Kvale, 1996; O'Connell & Kowle, 1999; Silverman, 1994).

As a means of reducing errors and maximizing transcription quality in our study, we reviewed each transcript produced. With completed transcript in hand, we returned to the audiotape, listening and comparing tape and text to ensure, in as much as possible, a measure of agreement between what was said and the way it was re/presented in text. The size of our study made such an assessment process possible.

#### Member Checking

Systematic member checking is one method qualitative researchers use to ascertain whether or not data are trustworthy (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Often participants receive transcripts but without any indication of how researchers have interpreted their words. After transcribing and coding our interview tapes (Coffey & Atkinson, 1996; Miles & Huberman, 1994), we sent transcripts plus statements of our preliminary interpretations to participant-transcribers for member-checks (Creswell, 2002; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). We constructed these synopses by working through transcripts page-by-page, noting key themes, and drawing evidence to support our analysis. Our participant-transcribers took the opportunity to clarify and/or elaborate on the recorded conversation, as well as critique the ways in which we were interpreting their words by making comments on the documents before returning them.

#### FINDINGS: "TRANSCRIPTION, HOW HARD COULD IT BE?"

##### Transcription Work

Although our transcriber-participants come from a variety of disciplinary backgrounds and had varying degrees of research experience, all of them told of having little or no knowledge of transcription before starting to transcribe research tapes. In discussing their backgrounds, half of them talked about the limitations of course

work in learning about qualitative research. Asked if his professors ever discussed transcription in the classroom, Nelson explained:

Even in the research course I took transcription was hardly ever discussed. You know we did all the sort of work, the over arching patterns, comparing paradigms of research but transcription was probably never to be found anywhere or might have been mentioned once, for a moment and that was it. (Nelson, transcript 1, p. 6 of 29)

The transcribers' stories of the little status afforded transcription work reflect research literature in which transcription is often viewed as a mundane task (Agar, 1996; Lapadat & Lindsay, 1999), usually completed by someone other than the researcher, or if discussed at all, is given minimal attention (Silverman, 1994).

Transcription, how hard could it be? I'm just typing up what I'm hearing. (Edmond, transcript 1, p. 7 of 44)

She [The principal researcher] just handed me a bunch [of tapes], "Here transcribe them." (Allison, transcript 1, p. 6 of 26)

Allison's description echoes that of all but one of the transcribers' experiences of taking up transcription work without any clear directions. The principal researchers did not involve them in discussions of transcription work nor were they provided instructions on how to complete the task. Allison describes going "blindly through" her work.

I've learned these [transcription] skills by doing it wrong, right? Or by process of elimination, or whatever, just from my own going blindly through it. . . . Some researchers think that it doesn't matter or that's the impression anyway, that however it is, it's fine. . . . JUST DO IT. (Allison, transcript 1, p. 11 of 26)

Several participant-transcribers also complained about the resources available and the questionable quality of the equipment they used. Nelson, for example, described his initial experiences transcribing by playing the research tapes on a traditional stereo, unaware that specific equipment existed to aid in transcription work. Nora told of searching for a transcription machine in her faculty resource centre and finding one that had been relegated to the trash because of its poor condition. The lack of equipment either available or made available for transcription work indicates the degree of seriousness with which principal researchers view the process.

Participant-transcribers discussed a further challenge of "just typing

up what one's hearing" in relation to the quality of tape recordings. Most of the transcribers complained of "muffled" tapes, "background noise," and interviewers who placed the tape recorder closer to themselves and further away from the person being interviewed. Sharon, an experienced transcriber involved in several projects with many different researchers, explains that

The worst kind of stuff is noise . . . noise, a number of people who do this is just amazing but they'll do an interview in a noisy cafeteria, they'll do it on a train, on a subway [laughter]. . . . Sometimes you just have [a] bad tape where the motor of the machine is somehow really noisy. (Sharon, transcript 1, p. 25 of 51)

With limited transcription knowledge and few if any directions provided by principal researchers, the transcribers in our study developed strategies to overcome challenges and make transcription decisions about representing in text the interactions heard on tape. They made decisions about formatting, indicating emotional responses such as laughter or shouting, and punctuating the text. Although most of the transcribers talked of trial by error experiences, two of them did create more detailed notation systems. "I did take notes of that, though . . . I wrote notes down about why I decided to remove it [a word] or not" (Yvonne, transcript 1, p. 7 of 25). Only Yvonne shared those notes on her decisions with her principal researcher. Principal researchers seemed to assume that either transcribers already had the knowledge and/or the experience needed to complete the task, or that they did not need help because the degree of complication did not warrant comprehensive discussion and direction. Such assumptions are particularly problematic considering that the participant-transcribers were making decisions about transcription in isolation from the research project.

In all cases transcribers made decisions while transcribing that influenced what ultimately appeared in text and that principal researchers accepted as re/presenting the data. Nelson admitted to "guessing" when the tape was difficult to hear and as a result omitting large sections of unclear tape.

It's a lot of rewinding, trying to listen to it again and again. . . . There are moments of guessing and then there is a lot of "unclear," you know you're just skipping large sections that are unclear. (Nelson, transcript, p. 8 of 29)

In this instance, Nelson was external to the research project and had no

other information to help him makes sense of the recorded conversation.

All transcribers indicated that a common decision they made in their transcription work was to omit or to write in brackets "indistinguishable" or something similar when they couldn't understand the tape, perhaps assuming that principal researchers could recall the original interaction and fill in the missed information. However, principal researchers do not always conduct the interview; in such cases they could not recall missing pieces, making the problem of transcriber omissions more complex.

Edmond described making purposeful, executive decisions on what to include in his transcripts.

I've seen absolutely verbatim transcriptions before and mine was not actually verbatim. I still omitted things at my own discretion. I would just leave out like major, lots of big chunks where people are just chattering about stuff that I thought was insignificant, not insignificant but insignificant to the project. [Individuals on tape] really going off on a tangent. Where there were just too many people talking at the same time, I just was like "You know what, we're not going to deal with that, it's not important [laughing]." (Edmond, transcript 1, pp. 8–9 of 44)

Edmond is positioned more as an invested transcriber than as someone external to the project. He was involved in the research in multiple ways, including conducting the interviews he describes transcribing. He did more than lift words from tape to text; he interpreted and analyzed as he made his decisions, perhaps feeling free to make executive decisions on what to include or not because of his level of involvement in the research. Edmond's description illustrates the possibilities that exist for significant data to not find its way into a researcher's hands and therefore be excluded from the analysis. If researchers systematically compared transcripts against tapes, decisions by individual transcribers would be made visible and the researchers could assess whether the decisions were appropriate. Edmond explained to us that the principal researcher accepted the transcripts he constructed without any mechanism in place to check tape against text.

In our discussions with transcribers, we made several observations: they had little knowledge of transcription when they started their work, the principal researchers did not often communicate with them, they faced many challenges in completing the work, and they made "on-the-spot" decisions about transcribing. As a result, we conclude that there are often reasonable grounds to question the trustworthiness of transcripts, and ultimately the research findings based on their analysis.



## Verbatim Transcripts

[T]he very notion of accuracy of transcription is problematic given the intersubjective nature of human communication, and transcription as an interpretive activity. (Poland, 1995, p. 297)

Although little evidence existed that transcribers received much direction about the transcription process, all commented in re-telling their experiences on the importance of transcribing research tapes verbatim to produce accurate texts, their decisions clearly grounded in realist assumptions. They understood accuracy as an exact match between what was recorded on tape and what was transcribed in text. During their interviews, none of the transcribers questioned the possibilities of producing such a match.

I always had in my mind that it has to be accurate. Just get it word-for-word. That's what they [researchers] are asking and that's what they are paying me to do. (Andrea, transcript 1, p. 17 of 30)

Participant-transcribers understood the possibility of capturing what was said on tape word-for-word as an ability connected to the degree to which the transcriber maintained objectivity. Grace spoke of her concern of passing on "biased data" to her researcher. Below she acknowledged that data are "screened" through her, while in the same breath suggested that the best way to produce unbiased data was to remain neutral herself, an achievement accomplished through individual effort.

[T]he data the researcher got was the data screened through me. Somehow I feel the need to be unbiased. Very important, I need to be very neutral. Otherwise the researcher might get some biased data, and that's really unfair for her. (Grace, transcript 1, p. 14 or 37)

Ironically, the transcribers, while pursuing the quest for objectivity and playing down the role of interpretation in their work, also spoke of the ways in which they became involved with the tapes they transcribed. Nelson's comment provides an example of this thinking.

[I]f somebody is describing something so harrowing, you know you are making all kinds of judgments of that subject, of even the interviewer, of the whole process. I remember distinctly being troubled by transcribing this one tape because, you know I couldn't help but have this feeling that how could she [the participant on tape] have been so passive, you know to have taken such a, to have been subject to so much

discrimination without fighting back and doing something. So the process of transcribing it's, it's really messy with all these kind of histories, anxieties that I feel when I'm listening to the stories. (Nelson, transcript 1, pp. 19–20 of 29)

Transcribers were pulled in by the stories they transcribed, forgetting to keep the distance necessary to support their claims of objectivity. Other research in this area (Tilley, 2003a) has illustrated instances where the transcriber's involvement with voices captured on tape influenced the final transcripts. They made more prominent, either by accident or intentionally, the voices they favoured.

Along with their concerns for constructing verbatim texts, an elusive goal considering the enormous loss experienced when live conversation is produced as skeletal text, participants also alluded to the importance of producing "good" transcripts that took the form of polished texts.

I spell check things so they are getting good [transcripts]. My command of grammar and spelling is pretty good so they [researchers] get well-punctuated stuff. I think what I'm getting complimented for is that they get good transcripts back. (Sharon, transcript 1, p. 17 of 51)

In Sharon's view, a "good" transcript is a grammatically correct text that is properly punctuated. Without considering the differences inherent in conversation and written text, she produced what she considers a good transcript, but in the process did not question the degree to which the transcript actually represented the interviewees' intended meanings. People's talk reflects a thinking-as-speaking process that is often difficult to re/present as text. Punctuation decisions are complex and important to the construction of the transcript. The transcriber's decisions on how to represent the flow of conversation influence the meanings that individuals reading the transcripts assign to what was said. Transcribers often feel pressure to tidy up "the messiness" of conversation and to produce a polished text that, although nice to look at, may not reflect the original conversation or intended meanings. Producing a transcript as close an approximation as possible to the conversation taped is a worthwhile goal that may not be achieved as a result of such a polishing process.

A critique of the assumptions informing concepts such as verbatim texts, accurate transcripts, and objective transcribers is particularly important, considering the ways in which transcripts once produced often take the place of the tapes and are treated as raw data. In our study, participant-transcribers, distanced from the research, produced

transcripts that researchers used as if raw data, often not returning to the tapes or accounting for the differences among the original conversations, tapes, and transcripts. We suggest that it is important to dispel the embedded assumptions that tape is equivalent to data, that the transcript is equivalent to the tape, and therefore that transcripts equal data. Or as Poland (1995) warns, "concern with ensuring transcripts are accurate may unreflexively conflate lived experience of the one-to-one conversation with recorded speech (tapes) and this speech with the written word (transcript)" (p. 291).

#### Distancing Dynamic and Trustworthy Data

Conversations with transcribers pointed to ways in which their distance from the research influenced decisions that shaped their transcripts. Transcribers spoke about their lack of familiarity with the language and culture connected to the research emphasis and context. They were distanced from the content captured on tape and this presented its own complications. Sharon, a transcriber external to the research, describes one such experience.

I listened to the tape and I could not understand. Initially, I couldn't understand 90% of what the guy was saying and I thought, "Wait a second. What's going on here?" I mean, some of it was, he was mumbling but normally I can rely on — you know we're speaking the [same] language and I can figure it out, but because it was an alien world that they were discussing I was really unfamiliar. (Sharon, transcript 1, p. 33 of 51)

Although Sharon spoke the same language as the people on the tape, she was not familiar with the discourse and could not easily decipher the conversation. The content of research tapes is often tied to the culture of a discipline or discourse that has its own language and set of cultural norms. Evidence of her difficulties took shape on the transcript.

There was so often vocabulary that was particular to their context and to the work that they were doing. It was totally foreign to me and so I knew I was getting it wrong and in some cases it would have been helpful [for the researcher] to just sit down and talk to me a little bit about what this [the research] is about and what kind of vocabulary I am going to encounter. I probably made lots of mistakes writing down the words as I heard them, which wasn't at all what was said and she [the researcher] would know the difference. (Sharon, transcript 1, p. 37 of 51)

The problem with relying on researchers to know the difference is that often they are not the interviewers. Sharon's suggestion for researchers

to provide information about the research focus and specialized vocabulary to the person transcribing before the work begins, while useful, is only one of many strategies necessary to ensure that the transcript produced is as representative as possible of the recorded conversation.

When cultural differences exist between participants and those who interact to collect/construct data, including the transcriber, issues of trustworthiness require further consideration. Edmond described circumstances when tapes resulting from interviews he conducted with participants of a similar cultural background (speaking English as a second language) were given to another research assistant to transcribe.

I'm [Edmond] of South African heritage and there were expressions that were being used that [the person transcribing the interview I conducted] could tell listening to the tape I understood because I was engaging in the conversation with the participants in the interview. I knew what was going on but I didn't think as the interviewer, to clarify on the tape at the time it was said. I just assumed that it made sense, realized later that it didn't. (Edmond, transcript 1, p. 16 of 44)

In this case, the transcriber's inability to work with sections of the tapes was not related to the proficiency of the interviewee's English, but to the culturally grounded, implicit knowledge he lacked. As he conducted the interview, Edmond was not cognizant of these seemingly normal cultural connections that would later play havoc for the person hired to transcribe the tape.

Cultural complications often multiply when research stretches across countries and continents. One transcriber described a project where the participants were situated in India, a place foreign to the principal researcher. The researcher had very limited knowledge of the language spoken by participants. A speaker of the local language who knew minimal English, with the researcher present in the room, conducted the interviews. The interviews were audiotaped and later, upon return to Canada, the principal researcher asked a participant-transcriber in our study, who had a similar language background as the participants in the India study, to translate the audiotapes from the local language to English. The last step in producing a transcript was the original researcher taking the English tapes and transcribing them. Even the most liberal-minded would have to ask what kind of re/presentation this researcher achieved with such a process to turn tape into text. What distance is an acceptable distance between researcher/interviewer/transcriber and data before questions of trustworthiness are raised? We suggest that degrees of

distance have not often been addressed in research contexts, or after the fact, because, for the most part, researchers are not required to provide transparency of method with respect to transcription or methodology in general when they report on their research. Although researchers have recommended the use of audit trails to address questions of credibility (Lincoln & Guba, 1985), the call for transparency of method (Constas, 1992) continues to be taken lightly.

Many of the eight participant-transcribers indicated that the transcriber's degree of investment in the work was tied to the distance between the transcriber and data collected. As distance decreased, feelings of investment often grew stronger. Transcribers claiming investment appeared to think deeply about the practice of research, often beyond a focus on transcription. Both Nora and Nelson spoke explicitly about their investment in the research. Nora explained:

I care about the data that we are collecting. I've actually gone out and collected the data. I'm responsible for doing some of the interviews. . . . It's meaningful work. I'm interested. I'm invested. I really feel that. (Nora, transcript 1, pp. 12–14 of 58)

Nelson had a variety of transcription experiences. He transcribed his own research tapes, was hired for isolated "hallway tapes," and was involved in interviewing and transcribing tapes in long-term, externally funded projects. He made connections between his level of involvement in the research project and the transcripts ultimately produced.

There are absolutely those situations where as a grad student, you know you need some money and you start canvassing professors in the hallways or wherever you can like, "Do you have any tapes available?" I've [even] e-mailed them. So definitely I've done a lot of external transcription. The internal ones definitely make a world of difference, to be what I term "invested and committed" to the project. I think I take the transcription much more seriously. I'm more meticulous. . . . I'm less perfunctory about it and lackadaisical about the whole project. (Nelson, transcript 1, p. 6 of 29)

#### Ethical Considerations

Through close scrutiny of our research process, and in particular our transcription practices, we expanded our understandings of ethical conduct in conducting respectful research (Tilley, 1998). During the project, challenges extended beyond questions of how to display talk as written text to include ethical considerations of respectful re/presentation. For example, our transcription decisions influenced the look of the transcripts

produced. The participant-transcribers in our study often took this look seriously, seeing the transcript as a reflection of themselves. In our preliminary synopses, we included a statement reminding our participants of the differences inherent between polished, written text and talk that has been written down. Despite this, many of our participant-transcribers expressed disappointment when they saw the results of their talk being turned into text. Seeming to judge by standards of formal writing, they felt they appeared incoherent or illiterate. Andrea reacted asking "WOW, is this what I sound like talking? . . . my gosh, I don't even make sense" (Andrea, transcript 2, p. 1 of 15). Edmond shared a similar feeling responding, "First of all, I was blown away by how incoherent I sound" (Edmond, transcript 2, p. 1 of 16). For many of the participants the paper re/presentation was not what they expected and their first viewing oftentimes resulted in feelings of inadequacy. For some participants, those feelings were alleviated quickly when we discussed this issue with them, but for others this was not the case. As researchers, we were reminded of the need to prepare participants for the look of transcripts prior to sending them copies, a process especially important when participants have previously experienced having their words turned against them or being marginalized through media and other discourses.

A second reaction to the returned transcripts was concern on the part of transcribers about the type and amount of information disclosed. Sharon described feelings of "uneasiness" with the content of her first interview.

I had moments of uneasiness as I read the transcript. That has to do with the fact that I'm discussing work, other people's work and I'm not sure whether . . . you know, just moments of uneasiness. That's why I'm going to be really careful that we make sure that people's work isn't identifiable and even that I'm not identifiable. (Sharon, transcript 2, pp. 4–5 of 20)

To help alleviate the transcribers' uneasiness about how they would be re/presented in print, we provided them with copies of manuscripts that we submitted for publication and welcomed their comments and feedback.

It was clear from our conversations that most of the participant-transcribers had not signed or thought about the necessity of transcribers signing confidentiality agreements. In most research studies, individuals agree to participate with a guarantee of a certain degree of anonymity and confidentiality. A risk, to which participants have not agreed, is

created when tapes are given to transcribers without confidentiality agreements being signed.

## DISCUSSION

Throughout this research project, we were constantly turning a critical lens on our own research practices. We took great care to examine our transcription process and to put in place strategies to lend credibility to our research. We were the researchers, interviewers, and transcribers, and were invested in the research. This is often not the case, particularly at this time in Canada when educational researchers are encouraged to collaborate within and across universities, countries, and continents to design megaprojects to compete for funding. The distance dynamic that is created, that separates researcher from raw data, especially in large projects, also needs to be considered in relation to methodological decisions and the practice of research. Other research credibility issues connected to this distance dynamic are important to address, but with limited space this article focuses specifically on the work of transcription.

### Implications of the Research

We offer the following points for researchers to consider when hiring others to turn their research tapes into texts, while acknowledging that even when researchers choose to complete the work themselves, similar care must be applied to the process.

We conclude from the data collected that the decision related to who is to complete the work of transcription is an important issue that needs to be considered at the research design stage. We recommend that, when possible, individuals hired to transcribe have connections to the research to encourage their investment. Comprehensive discussions between researchers and transcribers about the complexity of the process and the ways in which talk will be re/presented in text are necessary. Whether the research involves one or multiple individuals transcribing tapes, researchers need to establish a set of conventions appropriate to the purpose of the research as well as plans for analysis. Creating a system whereby individuals transcribing feel free to ask questions and are able to receive feedback will also be helpful in the production of quality transcripts. Although a system to check transcription quality will need to be context-specific, influenced by the size and character of the research, such a system will lend credibility to research outcomes. One step in the process might be to listen to tapes with completed transcript in hand, a

practice helpful in discerning certain types of mistakes that influence transcript quality. When the number of research tapes prevents this degree of checking, researchers could check a selection of transcripts, especially those that transcribers self-report as having been difficult to transcribe (Poland, 1995).

## CONCLUSION

An enormous amount of qualitative data is, and will continue to be, collected through the use of audio (or video) tapes, and the quality of the transcription process will dictate, to a large degree, the quality of transcripts produced. We agree with Silverman (1994) who, while describing "group data-analysis sessions" as a means of assuring the reliability of transcripts, commented that the perfect transcript was not achievable.

It is important here that we do not delude ourselves into seeking a "perfect" transcript. Transcripts can always be improved and the search for perfection is illusory and time-consuming. Rather the aim is to arrive at an agreed transcript, adequate for the task at hand. (p. 149)

No generalized method is available to produce the perfect transcript; however, informed ways exist to go about the work of transcription that contribute to the credibility of research outcomes. The practice of assigning transcription to someone other than the researcher is likely to continue in light of time and other constraints most researchers face when conducting qualitative research. Although perfect transcripts do not exist, the degree of match between tape and text will vary with the amount of care taken in the transcription process.

Stories of limited directions, minimal support, and lack of appropriate equipment confirm our position that transcription continues to be pushed to the margins of the research process. When researchers treat transcription as a chore, ignoring the complexities of the process, individuals hired to transcribe are encouraged to hold similar views, placing little value on the process and as a result endangering the credibility of researchers' findings.

Transcribers' stories of their experiences, including the strategies they developed and the decisions made in situ, bring into view the interpretive, analytical, and theoretical aspects of turning tape into text. They described situations that illustrate the misrepresentation of data resulting from their transcription decisions. In all cases, researchers were



on the receiving end of transcripts constructed by transcribers who were distanced, by various degrees, from the data collected and these transcripts played a prominent role in researchers' analyses. The stories told highlight the ways in which transcription is tied to issues of data trustworthiness and the risks researchers take by not considering the process seriously.

The experiences explored in this article are specific to particular transcribers, contexts, and research projects; however, the stories presented hold promise for others as a backdrop to critique their own research practices. When qualitative data are collected through audio/video taping, transcription work is an integral part of the research process, deserving serious attention.

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#### NOTES

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## APPENDIX A: TRANSCRIPTION CONVENTIONS

<b>Sounds:</b>	
Thinking before someone speaks	um , ah
I've never thought of that before	hmph (=huhm, ha, huh)
Affirmative sounds	yup (=yep), yeah (=yah, yea, ya)
Listening + encouragement	uhum (=aha, uha, mmm)
Environmental sounds	(tapping), (knock at door), (shuffling papers)
<b>Tone of speaker</b>	
Louder	CAPITAL LETTERS
<b>Demonstrative expressions</b>	
Words spoken while laughing	(laughing)
Laughter when both parties are laughing at something	(laughter)
Other	(coughing), (sighing), etc.
Pauses +5 seconds	(pause)
Interruptions	use (inter.) where the break happens
Self-talk or repeating what someone else said	Use "quotes"
Repetition	Type out the repeated words, words, words
<b>Punctuation</b>	
end of thought	a period (.) at the end of the complete idea
end of phrase / clause	use a comma (,)
thought not completed	use an ellipse . . . as the thought trails off
Cross-talk: two or more speakers speaking at the same time / over each other	(CT)
Tape is unclear/ muffled and can't make out word or phrase of one speaker	(indistinguishable word / phrase)